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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 002526

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SUBJECT: POLL UNDERScores AMBASSADOR'S CONCERNS ON CRIME

REF: A. SAN SALVADOR 2204

[1](#)B. SAN SALVADOR 1702

Classified By: CDA Michael A Butler. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Results from a CID-Gallup poll publicized October 17 in leading daily El Diario de Hoy demonstrate that Salvadorans share the Ambassador's deep concern that spiraling violent crime threatens El Salvador's continued economic development and the consolidation of its democratic institutions. (Note: The previous evening, the Ambassador had highlighted many of the same public security concerns in a major policy address attended by approximately 500 of the country's most influential government, private sector, NGO, and church leaders. End note.) Some 64 percent of those surveyed now think the country is headed in the wrong direction, compared with only 40 percent one year ago; 45 percent list crime and violence as their number-one concern, followed by unemployment at only 18 percent. Just a year earlier, unemployment had edged out crime (25 to 24 percent) as Salvadorans' chief concern. The Ambassador told the leading policy makers of the country in his address that El Salvador must make improvements in the security situation now, lest crime erodes the benefits of CAFTA-DR and a Millennium compact. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) The fact that rampant crime and violence is the number one problem facing El Salvador has been widely accepted here for months. The poll highlights this clearly. Twenty-four percent of respondents report that either they or a family member were victims of robbery or assault in just the past four months. The poll reports that 47 percent of people feel less safe in their neighborhoods and 55 percent less safe riding buses since the Saca Administration took power. Forty-one percent of people reported less confidence in the police under Saca, and 90 percent (47 less, 43 equal) said that the current administration has been equally or less successful in the fight against gangs.

[1](#)3. (U) This poll also sheds light on how the Salvadoran public thinks the problem should be solved. Of those interviewed, 25 percent believe there need to be stronger punishments for criminals as the principal solution, 24 percent believe that the problem can best be solved if the armed forces intervene to stop crime, and 24 percent believe the death penalty should be legalized. Fifteen percent believe El Salvador must first hire more police, and 12 percent believe the principal solution is to try minors as adults. Support for these measures indicate how strongly the public feels about taking more drastic actions to solve the problem.

[1](#)4. (U) The poll also asked why people believe the crime problem has not abated. Thirty-five percent said that the

principal reason is because bad judges let gang members go free, 16 percent mentioned lack of police, 12 percent said poor leadership in the Legislative Assembly, 10 percent underlined a lack of trust in the police, 8 percent said because witnesses were too afraid to testify and 7 percent blamed weak prosecutors. Salvadorans are also pessimistic about the rehabilitation of criminals. Sixty-one percent surveyed said they felt there was little or no possibility of rehabilitation for violent criminals and 69 percent said there was little or no chance that they would be friends with or work at a job with rehabilitated violent criminals or gang members.

15. (U) The final area of interest in this new polling data has to do with dissatisfaction of Salvadorans with the current political parties. Forty-eight percent said they had no preferred political party, 28 percent named ARENA and 16 percent said FMLN. The poll also asked respondents to list whom they blame for the bitter political polarization paralyzing the government's ability to make compromise and centrist decisions for the benefit of society. 29 percent said the FMLN was either too aggressive or did not want compromise, while 13 percent said the same of ARENA. Nine percent blamed both parties and 11 percent cited simple lack of leadership. The Ambassador touched on nearly all of these concerns in his October 16 address hosted by Salvadoran think tank FUSADES. He stressed that Salvadorans should take responsibility and ownership of the problem and urged all sectors of society to take part in solving the crisis. He argued that the Salvadorans must get more criminals off the street and behind bars now. He further emphasized the need for better tax collection to help pay for these new initiatives.

16. (C) Comment: The numbers from the recent poll are troublesome for a number of reasons. We are not surprised at how grave the crime problem is--it is palpable on the streets. But the profound lack of faith in the administration of justice and the facility with which Salvadorans are willing to accept undemocratic solutions for greater security are troubling. All of the dramatic successes of taking a country from a devastating civil conflict down the road of recovery could be put at risk if the Salvadorans cannot muster the political will to address the crime issue democratically. We will continue to help the Salvadorans improve their administration of justice and rule of law, while pressing that it is time for all sectors of society in El Salvador to take responsibility for the issue. Butler